



YOUR LETTERS

MAILBOX

We've had lots of letters about broadband speeds this month, but it seems the only way to guarantee a faster connection is to move nearer the exchange. Or move away from Milton Keynes

★ Failure rates How can you judge hard disk reliability?



As always, the recent review of hard disks (*Shopper 242*) provided a lot of useful information. However, there was (for me) a glaring absence: reliability.

My experiences over the years is that from time to time I will have a disk failure, but during the past six months I have had four – all SATA drives and all well within their warranty. The first was a 'sudden death' resulting in the loss of hundreds of gigabytes of work, emails, photos, videos and downloads. Fortunately, the subsequent three failures were good enough to give me warnings in the form of metallic clicks and blue screens of death. These were followed immediately by frantic installation of a new disk, installation of an operating system (by restoration of an XP image) and transfers from the faulty drive to external hard disks.

'Frantic' doesn't really describe the hassle involved, though. First, I had to decide what was most important, then decide how to split the downloads into acceptably sized volumes to try and avoid a crash during the transfers. The entire transfer was carried out over a period of days because the defective drive could only be powered up for an undefined and variable amount of time.

Sometimes I do not learn from experience, but losing an almost full 300GB drive has been an effective teacher. Perhaps reliability data is not available outside the manufacturer's quality assurance manager's office. Perhaps your reviews cover only new products because older products quickly disappear off the shelves and are replaced by newer, higher-capacity drives using new technologies. A three-year warranty suggests reliability, but in my case it is pretty meaningless.

AR Evans

Reliability testing is the one thing that we find very difficult to do here. The review samples that we get come directly from the manufacturer, and we only

review new products to ensure that they're on sale when the magazine comes out. If we were to keep samples for longer and run our tests for a few months the chances are that we'd get good reliability figures, but you wouldn't be able to buy any of the products.

Hard disk manufacturers all have reliability figures, described as the mean-time between failures, which we don't quote. The problem with these figures is that it's an average between failure times, not a guaranteed running time, which can be much shorter – or much longer.

Google has written a report on the subject of hard disk failure, based on its huge collection of hard disks used to run the search engine. The results (http://research.google.com/archive/disk_failures.pdf) make for an interesting read, particularly as the report found that hard disks don't last as long as you'd expect and that the usual suspects for failure – temperature and high activity levels – aren't as common as you'd think.

Although it's upsetting to think that a hard disk can fall over at any time, it should act as a stark reminder to us all that digital data is actually quite fragile and easily lost. With the huge expense involved in recovering data from a damaged disk, we should all act now and make regular backups of all our important data. Backups should be made to another disk or, preferably, an external source such as a USB hard disk or DVD.

There are some ways to help prevent disk damage that we've come across. First, look at where your computer is. We knew someone that kept a small PC on a wobbly desk next to the monitor. This computer suffered the highest number of hard disk failures we've ever seen. Once the computer was relocated to the floor, the problems stopped. While the Google report said that temperature wasn't as big a killer of hard disks as is commonly thought, we'd still recommend making sure that your computer is well ventilated and that all fans work correctly.



► Manufacturer reliability reports are based on averages and aren't a guarantee of operating time, so you should always back up important data

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SUPPORT FOR ALL?

I bought issue 243 of *Computer Shopper* for the scanner reviews. Having upgraded to Windows Vista

Home Premium, I was disappointed to find that the version of Omnipage I had didn't work, so I was looking to change my scanner to one that came with good OCR software.

Having read the article I decided the Epson Perfection V200 Photo was the model to go for. Unfortunately, when I checked on Epson's website I found that this brand-new model did not support Vista, which is over a year old.

I would have thought that the vast majority of hardware sold today is destined to work on Vista and I do feel that your review should say whether the hardware you review doesn't work with certain operating systems.

Martin Heskins

Our reviews mention if there are any obvious omissions, such as Windows Vista not being supported. In the case of the Epson Perfection V200 Photo, its Epson's website that's misleading. The specifications page doesn't list Windows Vista support, but in fact the scanner does support this operating system.

If you go to the scanner's support page (<http://esupport.epson-europe.com>) and navigate to the V200's driver page, you can select Windows Vista from the drop-down operating system box. This will give you a list of compatible drivers and software that you can use even if the boxed product doesn't come with Vista drivers. The bundled OCR software, Abby FineReader 6, is listed as Windows Vista-compatible.

MILTON KEYNES DOES HAVE BROADBAND

I've just finished reading issue 243 and I was gobsmacked by the assertion that you cannot get broadband in Milton Keynes ('Banish the Broadband Blues', page 129), and that WiMax was the saviour for the local residents.

This is total hogwash, and broadband has been available in Milton Keynes for years. Where did this fact come from? There were some small availability issues in certain areas, but this was resolved by BT in 2004, when the distance that a house could be from an exchange was increased.

Maybe you need to get out of London and visit us simple folk in the shires once in a while.

Neil Postlethwaite

We didn't mean to offend any of our readers in Milton Keynes. The information we printed was a little misleading, and simplified the problem with this area. What we should have said was that cable broadband from Virgin Media is impossible to get in this area. Due to the ridiculous way that the government sold franchises for cable companies, Milton Keynes has been left with an out-dated network that won't support broadband.

The initial network was installed by BT, but the government then decided that the company couldn't be a cable provider and a regular telecoms company, so NTL leased the network. Virgin Media then bought NTL, and the lease



▲ Poor broadband speeds can be due to a number of things, including living in Milton Keynes

moved over. However, as the company doesn't own the network it can't upgrade it and BT doesn't seem to want to do so, either.

That leaves Milton Keynes residents with ADSL, but even this isn't perfect. Many houses are a long way from the exchange, which means that they are stuck with slow connections, while other parts still can't get broadband. The Milton Keynes Broadband Action Group (www.bb4mk.org) has more details on the ongoing problems there.

For the short-term, at least, it doesn't look as though there's going to be a massive improvement in broadband services to Milton Keynes, which is where new technologies such as WiMAX can help. With lower installation costs and better range, WiMAX can deliver broadband to communities that previously didn't have it or were suffering from slow speeds.

WHO'S TO BLAME FOR POOR BROADBAND SPEEDS?

I know what I'm going to say will probably be slightly controversial, but I really have no issue with the 'up to 8Mbit/s' sales pitch. I switched to BT recently knowing full well that I would not be able to get 8Mbit/s but happy anyway; you see, the 'up to' bit set off a little spark of curiosity, so I looked into it and almost

immediately found the terms and conditions, 'subject to your line's capability' or equivalent. I felt that the provider did everything it needed to let me know what I was letting myself in for.

I ask all of these people currently complaining a simple question: if you were looking through *Auto Trader* and saw a car advertised as having 'up to' a full service history or 'up to' 11 previous owners, would you not look for a bit more detail?

Simon Grimshaw

We largely agree with you. Broadband speeds are so reliant on a wide range of factors that it's impossible to put a definite figure on the speed that you'll actually get. As long as ISPs are upfront about that, we've got no problem with the 'up-to' speed.

The current range of campaigns that are searching for clearer advertising are missing the point and don't understand how broadband works. The only way to make the truth about broadband speeds clear is to print a huge volume of text with each advert that describes every factor that could make your connection slow.

Ultimately, that's not possible and factors outside of an ISP's control, such as the quality of extension wiring in your home, can play a major factor. That said, not all ISPs are equal and you may get a better service by switching ISP. The problem is, how do you tell?

The first place to start is with last month's 'Banish the Broadband Blues' feature, which takes you through the most common checks for poor broadband speed. These include your distance from the exchange, the time of day and the quality of wiring inside your house.

Once you've illuminated every possibility and you're still getting poor speeds, then it's time to think about switching. Fortunately, we can help. Our broadband survey (www.realbroadband.speed.co.uk) currently has over 10,000 completed entries telling us how quick each ISP is and the quality of the service they provide. There's still time to help by completing the survey (it closes on 1st May) and telling us about your ISP. With all the information that we get, ➔

WRITE IN AND WIN!

If you want to make the most out of your home movies and photographs, then Adobe's Photoshop Elements 6 and Premiere Elements 4 are the best and easiest way to do so. If you fancy getting your hands on these products, there's no need to put your hand in your pocket; all you have to do is write a great letter. Get it printed as our Star Letter, and a copy of both applications will be winging its way to you in the post.

Photoshop Elements 6 is the best home photo-editing application. Its powerful features are taken from the full Photoshop application, so you can get the same results, but Elements is a lot easier to use. Premiere Elements 4 does a similar job for movie making, pulling its features from the high-end Premiere software, but making it all easier to use so you'll be able to produce Hollywood-style movies from the comfort of your home.

**PLUS!**

Every published letter-writer who provides their address also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug





YOUR LETTERS

we'll be able to compile a true view of the UK's broadband and who's providing the fastest and most reliable service.

...BUT IT'S MAINLY BT'S FAULT



I have been using broadband since it became available, and I was wondering why people keep blaming slow speeds on their ISP. I live approximately three-quarters of a mile from my exchange and, at best, can only get 900Kbit/s download speeds. After checking with BT, I've found that there's currently only 1Mbit/s broadband in my area, although my ISP can provide up to 8Mbit/s.

How can I get BT to increase the line speed of my service? None of the BT engineers I've talked to knows when the service is due to be upgraded. How can I find out when we're due for faster broadband?

AT Jeffrey

When it comes to upgrading exchanges, there are two options: BT can upgrade the exchange itself as part of its wholesale business, thereby offering faster internet speeds to all customers of ISPs that use BT's equipment; or your area can have local loop unbundling (LLU), whereby an ISP installs its own equipment in an exchange and takes over renting your telephone line to you.

The problem is that for either of these options to happen, there's got to be enough money to warrant the upgrade. Typically, the ISPs and BT focus on areas of high demand, where the most amount of money is to be made. In lower-demand areas, there's not the same incentive to upgrade. You'll have a hard job

finding out the schedule for upgrades. In the meantime, see if Virgin Media offers broadband coverage in your area. Its service uses a different network and doesn't have the same issues.

SOFTWARE GOING CHEAP



I came across the website www.software4students.co.uk the other day and thought I should let your readers know about it, as I like passing on good news and bargains. As the website name suggests, it's designed for students, so you'll need the name of the school or university that you or your children go to. If you find that yours isn't listed, just email the website and the details will be added.

Graham Wardlaw

Thanks for the tip, Graham. A quick look at the website shows that there are some amazing



▲ You can pick up a copy of Office Professional 2007 for under £50 if you or a member of your family are attending a school, college or university

bargains to be had for students, including Office Professional Plus 2007 for £46 and Windows Vista Ultimate Upgrade for £61. The site is supported by Microsoft and, although no ID or student card is required, you or someone else in your house needs to be at a UK-registered school, college or university.

For the rest of us looking for a bargain on Microsoft software there are a couple of alternatives. The Home and Student edition of Office 2007 costs around £75, but includes licences for three PCs, so it's great value. Windows operating systems can be bought cheaply if you go for the OEM versions, which have to be bought with a piece of hardware, such as a motherboard or hard disk. However, the OEM versions don't have the same level of support as the retail versions and you're effectively saying that you'll support yourself. If you're happy with this, though, you can find some good deals, such as Windows Vista Home Premium for around £60 including VAT.

SHOPPER GETS YOU A BETTER DEAL

In response to our review of web-hosting packages (*Shopper 243*), we received the following letter from Netcetera, whose One service received a four-star review:



Thank you very much for including Netcetera's ONE Package in *Computer Shopper's* Labs review of web hosting packages. We are glad you were delighted with the features and functions and thank you for highlighting the flexibility, backup facility and range of support offered by Netcetera's package.

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The Editor is always pleased to receive ideas for articles, preferably sent first in outline form, with details of the author's background and, where available, samples of previously published work. We cannot, however, accept responsibility for unsolicited copy and it may take time for us to reply.

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You also mentioned that a SQL database is not part of the package. As a result of your comments, and wishing to respond to our customers' needs, Netcetera has now included 50MB of MySQL space in its ONE Package, at no extra charge. We thought you should be made aware of this, which is in direct response to your review.

Many thanks for pointing this out. Such reviews are extremely helpful to all concerned.
*Dave Boswell, chief operating officer,
Netcetera.co.uk*

It's good to see that companies listen to customer requirements and can add that little bit extra in.

Now all we need to do is set our sights on Microsoft and see if it can include a feature that will make Excel display graphs properly. Or maybe Apple can release an updated service that doesn't automatically try and install Safari and iTunes on your PC.

GO ONLINE AND PAY MORE



I just bought some kit from a nationally advertised website that was offering a special two-for-one deal with free postage. However, when I ordered online I found that I had been charged the postage fee. I queried the charge and found out that the price quoted was for orders by phone or mail. As I had ordered by internet, I had to pay for the postage. The only offer I was given was to return the goods at my postage cost.

In all my experience, this is the first time I have ever been charged extra for ordering via

the internet. Most suppliers reduce the price when ordering online.

Bob Thomson

That's a very strange policy. The beauty about ordering online is that the company doesn't need to pay for lots of expensive telephone lines or even for people to be around when an order is made. There's also no need for traditional shops in a lot of cases, so big warehouses can be used elsewhere, passing the savings on to the customer. To charge extra for using the internet seems more than a little crazy. Has anyone else had a similar experience?

AN L OF A CHALLENGE



I enjoyed reading the 'Linux For Beginners' article in issue 243 to such an extent that I thought I'd give Ubuntu a try. I followed the instructions and even as I type this email have the Ubuntu desktop open on my PC (running under Microsoft's Virtual PC as per the instructions).

I particularly liked the test where I had to find out for myself that the grub menu was 'menu.lst' rather than 'menu.1st'. It's good that you try to keep your readers on their toes.

Steve Webb

Thanks for spotting that deliberate mistake. Half the fun of using Linux is working out what command you're supposed to be using and editing configuration files to get the thing working properly. It's obviously nothing like using Windows, which works all the time, never has bizarre hardware errors and has all its settings stored in intuitive places... **CS**

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